

Schools: They Will Come, We'd Better Build It

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The continuing increase in public school enrollment in Montgomery County is both a challenge and an opportunity. In the last four years, the enrollment has grown by nearly 12,000 children, reaching almost 140,000 students this year. The birthrate now averages one new baby every 40 minutes. More than 17,000 children attend classes in temporary trailers. Saying our schools are crowded is an understatement.

The opportunity exists for demonstrating that our community can continue to shoulder the immense responsibility of providing quality schools for current and future generations of children. Two years ago, we began to lay the fiscal groundwork to meet those responsibilities.

Just like traffic congestion, classroom congestion threatens our children's quality of life, and we are committed to finding solutions. This fall, the County Council has taken three important steps to meet that goal. In September, the County Council increased spending affordability guidelines by almost \$250 million over the next six years to ensure that sufficient bond funding will be available to fund needed capital projects. At the same time, we amended our recordation tax law, making it clear that almost \$20 million annually will be targeted to school construction and technology. Just last week, the Council approved a school impact tax on new residential housing to provide nearly \$25 million each year in additional school construction funding.

But, there is more work to be done. The size and scope of providing quality educational facilities is immense. Not only do we need more schools and permanent classrooms, but also there are aging facilities to be modernized, gyms to be added, and core facilities to be upgraded. The recommendations recently unveiled by Superintendent of Schools Jerry D. Weast help us begin the task of bringing our schools back from the brink of congestive building failure.

However, the current limited level of state aid will not permit us to meet our challenges. State school construction funding has plummeted from \$51 million three years ago to less than \$11 million this year. We need more than three times the amount of state aid than currently obligated under the state's minimum standards

Closer to home, we need to ensure that protecting the infrastructure of our schools remains a priority in our own County budget. The school system should receive a substantial portion of the recently approved increase in the bond funding targets. Otherwise, we can expect only continued delays in the effort to reopen schools, build new schools, and provide additional classrooms throughout the County.

Montgomery County is at an important crossroads. Traffic congestion demands solutions, but school congestion also requires dramatic solutions. It will take a commitment from our state government to allow us to meet the challenge. Our future hinges as much on the quality of our schools as the roads that take us to them.

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